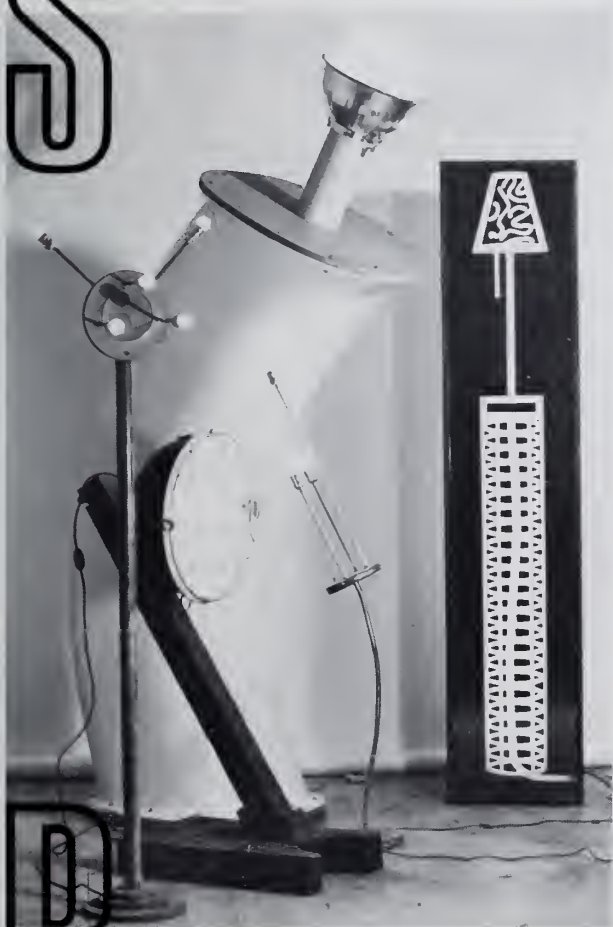


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C U L P T U R E O F R . M . F I S C H E R



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M. Fischer's lamp works belong to the distinguished tradition of assembled metal sculpture. Invented by Picasso as a way of incorporating real things into an otherwise abstract syntax, the mode has since sustained such diverse sculptors as Julio Gonzalez, Alberto Giaco-



metti, David Smith, and Anthony Caro. Fischer's work combines the weird humor of certain Dadaist and Duchampian sculpture with a formal seriousness usually associated with constructivist-assemblagist work. His lamps may look zany, but each has a highly ordered structure. Fischer's conscious exploitation of the

comic aspects of his work is relatively anomalous among contemporary sculptors, many of whom are fascinated with the apocalyptic or the grossly self-revelatory. Fischer is neither an expressionist nor an introspective primitive. On the contrary, he recognizes the continuing vitality of Pop Art. His notion of what art should or can do is thus like that of the early Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Like them—as he readily admits—his aesthetic has been conditioned by the surfeit of advertising imagery and media-disseminated pictures in post-World War II America.

One of the first of Fischer's lamp sculptures (1978) was a three-dimensional interpretation of a light bulb and the shadow it cast as it appeared in a black-and-white still photograph from Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*. This early lamp piece was intended to physically augment a quasi-narrative collage, one of many Fischer made at this point, that utilized the *Rear Window* still. But soon after making the lamp, Fischer realized that it could survive well alone. He found it a good deal more interesting than the collages. Its structure offered him an elegant set of abstract yet utilitarian characteristics. And its upright, floor-bound nature also suggested anthropomorphic possibilities. Like other contemporary American artists, Richard Artschwager foremost among them, Fischer saw human surrogates in furniture forms. Moreover, the household familiarity of the lamps camouflages the formal ambition of Fischer's art.

Fischer fashioned a large group of lamps during 1978–79, all using found parts and single light bulbs in simple compositional formats. Several of these pieces were shown in 1979 at Artists Space, New York. They were notable, and much discussed at the time, for Fischer's willingness to make of his humble materials the most exaggerated thing imaginable. Big, attenuated versions of gooseneck lamps figured prominently in the show. As an ensemble, the works displayed a linear, drawn quality: their mannered effect de-

pendent on great, arching movements or coy twists of line rather than on mass. The ratio of light shed to the supporting apparatus was ludicrously small—they were dinosaur lamps.

Wired (1979) deftly summarized these early pieces: a tall, slim cylinder of mesh fence supports a skinny stem topped by a red shade. Here, as in all the work that followed, Fischer does nothing to disguise the electric cord and plug. Unadorned, their presence underscores the object's utility, however contravened it may be by fanciful armature.

Throughout 1979 and 1980 Fischer's work was exhibited in unlikely venues, including department store windows in New York and Chicago and an avant-garde furniture boutique in Soho. By that time he had formed Ronell Productions, a distribution system for his work, with Elliot Wertheim, a friend in advertising. Ronell was an attempt to devise promotional and marketing techniques beyond those practiced in the art gallery network. As part of his sales efforts, Fischer made some standing light boxes whose faces showed linear renditions, in negative, of his three-dimensional works (*Light Box No. 2*, 1979, for example). Ronell Productions also created an advertising campaign for the art press featuring logo-like images of Fischer's lamps. Although Ronell has been inactive of late, Fischer retains a keen interest in having his work seen in unconventional, often commercial milieus. Seeking to reach the widest possible audience, he has also made two series of lamp multiples.

Elbow Macaroni and *Flash* (both 1980) reveal Fischer's growing confidence with sculptural mass. Each is made largely of found parts—*Elbow Macaroni* from a large piece of curved fiberglass duct, *Flash* from components of wooden furniture and metal objects. The moderne look of *Elbow Macaroni* and the Buck Rogers, 1930s spaceship look of *Flash* are part of the same aesthetic development: Fischer's penchant, more fully realized in later works, for combining industrial

detritus in a decidedly science fiction way. He thus constructs an engaging paradox, making outdated castoffs seem futuristic. This paradox underlies the success of his work, and is a welcome revision of the nostalgic surrealism that has weakened most objet-trouvé sculpture since the 1940s. Fischer so thoroughly transforms what he uses that its origins are rendered irrelevant and its previous uses are obscured. Each lamp actually supplies light. To the degree that the viewer is willing to admit its preposterous appearance, the lamp becomes a tool as much as, or more than, an aestheticized object.

With such works as *Roma* (1980), Fischer began to move away from the serendipity implicit with found objects toward a more engineered, almost pre-planned, method. A lighted fountain as it were, *Roma* incorporates light bulbs, an electric pump to recycle water, and a plastic waste basket as basin. A tongue-in-cheek, suburban American tribute to the great fountains of Rome, the piece is a domestic descendant of a group of outdoor birdbaths Fischer made for parks on Staten Island as a C.E.T.A. worker in 1980. *Fountain* (1983) is the largest and most elaborate of this genre.

The futuristic strain in Fischer's work reaches an apex in recent sentinel-like pieces such as *Century City* and *Max* (both 1983). Nearly eight feet tall, each is an over-life-size totem composed, as usual, of the most unlikely things. *Century City*, planned as an edition of eight, rises up from a flat, circular marble

base which reflects light directed at it from an upside-down steel mixing bowl. A black pole emerges from the bowl, capped by a milk white plastic bowl-shade, which is crowned in turn by two steel mixing bowls placed face-to-face about six inches apart. A brass arm drops down from these bowls, ending in a bulb enclosed by a stainless-steel latticework. *Max* repeats the head-like, mirrored steel bowls in *Century City*, and sports an additional, somewhat smaller, lighted cap. Below, a knot of pipes rests on a limestone base. A small brass Sputnik-era light juts off to one side with military-industrial might.

A limestone block also serves as a base for the lopsided *Futura* (1983). For *Rolling Rock* (1983) and other recent pieces, Fischer built the metal work around chunks of lava stone. Despite the prominence of such naturalistic elements, these works retain a space-age look, for the lava is easily read as a geological specimen retrieved from a galactic neighbor.

Some of Fischer's most recent works make greater use of better quality materials and more refined components, including custom-cut plate glass and a variety of exotic brass fixtures. *Dynasty* (1983–84) and *Ice Palace* (1983) are examples of this deluxe treatment. He is deliberately seeking a new sense of opulence that reflects his own confidence in a post-industrial future. His work is optimistic.

Richard Armstrong
Adjunct Curator

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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945 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021

Design: H H A design, Hannah H. Alderfer

Photographs by John Budde, except for *Max* by Geoffrey Clements and *Century City* by Kevin Noble.



◀
Upper left:
Flash, 1980



Lower left:
Roma, 1980



Upper right:
Jules Verne, 1980



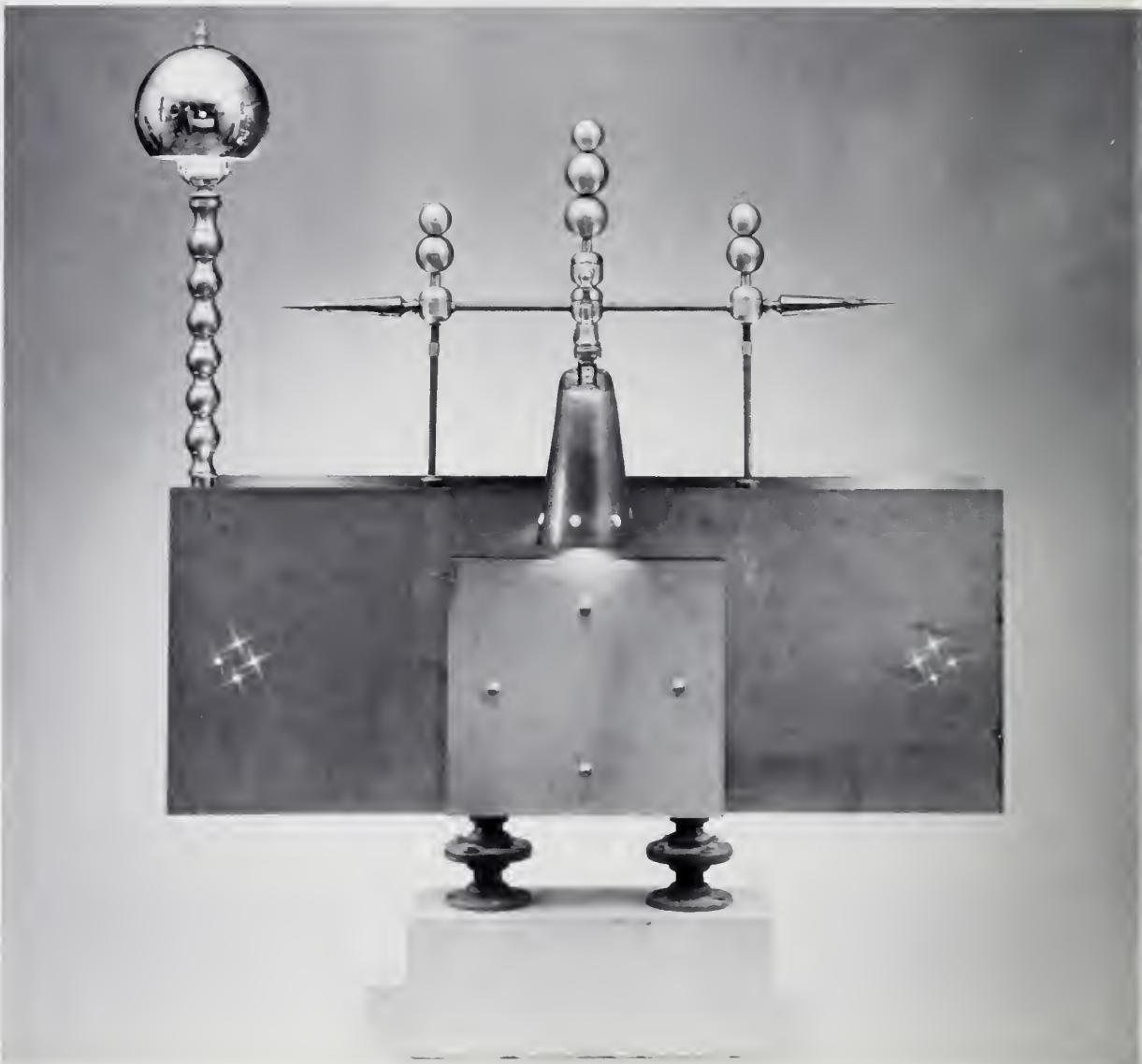
Lower right:
Rolling Rock, 1983



▶
Above:
American Electric,
1983



Below:
Dynasty, 1983–84



◀
From left to right:
Century City, 1983
Max, 1983
Hiawatha, 1984

R. M. FISCHER

Born in Brooklyn, 1947. Studied at Long Island University, Brookville, New York (B.A., 1971); San Francisco Art Institute (M.F.A., 1973). Lives in New York.

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

- 1974 O.K. Harris Works of Art, New York.
- 1975 O.K. Harris Works of Art, New York.
- 1979 Stanley Korshak (window installation), Chicago.
Bloomingdale's (window installation), New York.
Artists Space, New York.
- 1980 Fiorucci's (store and window installation),
New York.
Art et Industrie, New York.
- 1981 Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati.
Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco.
Stefanotti, New York.
- 1982 Stefanotti, New York.
Texas Gallery, Houston.
- 1983 Baskerville + Watson Gallery, New York.

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Slesin, Suzanne. "Confronting Playful Lamps." *The New York Times* (May 1, 1980), section C, pp. 1, 8.

Smith, Roberta. *Body Language: Figurative Aspects of Recent Art* (exhibition catalogue). Cambridge: Hayden Gallery, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1981.

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WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Wired, 1979

Steel mesh, wood, paper, electric light, 72x12x12
Collection of Carole Ann Klonarides

Elbow Macaroni, 1980

Fiberglass, wood, plastic, aluminum, glass, electric light,
98x24x24
Collection of Donald and Mera Rubell

Flash, 1980

Painted steel, aluminum, wood, brass, electric lights,
37x26x16
Collection of Yves Arman

Roma, 1980

Galvanized steel, steel, plastic, wood, cast metal, water,
electric lights, 56x48x20
Private collection

Jules Verne, 1980

Brass, aluminum, steel, electric lights, 42x20x13
Collection of Michael Hurson

Strawberry Shortcake, 1982

Aluminum, cast metal, steel, plastic, electric lights,
58x24x24
Collection of the artist

American Electric, 1983

Aluminum, brass, steel, plastic, electric lights, 29x142x22
Collection of the artist

Century City, 1983

Steel, marble, brass, stainless steel, electric lights,
93x28x28
Courtesy of Baskerville + Watson Gallery, New York

Futura, 1983

Brass, steel, limestone, plastic, glass, electric lights,
39x36x20
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel J. Heyman

Ice Palace, 1983

Steel, brass, glass, aluminum, electric lights, 82x34x22
Collection of the artist

Max, 1983

Steel, limestone, brass, electric lights, 86x33½x33½
Whitney Museum of American Art; Purchase, with funds
from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 83.7

Rolling Rock, 1983

Lava stone, chromed steel, steel, brass, electric lights,
30x28x36
Collection of the artist

Dynasty, 1983-84

Brass, steel, plastic, limestone, aluminum, electric lights,
44x36x16
Collection of the artist

Hiawatha, 1984

Brass, aluminum, steel, plastic, cast metal, electric lights,
104x32x32
Courtesy of Baskerville + Watson Gallery, New York

On view in the Lower Gallery:

Fountain, 1983, from *Water Under the Bridge* installation at
the Brooklyn Bridge anchorage, May-October 1983
Stainless steel, cast plastic, water, electric light, 72x72x73
(overall)
Collection of the artist

Cover (left): *Mouse Lamp*, 1980, *Salon Lamp*, 1980, *Elbow
Macaroni*, 1980, *Untitled*, 1979, *Light Box No. 2*, 1979
Cover (right): *Strawberry Shortcake*, 1982
